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Threnody Unthreaded: Iraq and its Aftermath in Richard House's *The Kills*

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Abstract: *The Kills* (2013), Richard House's epic novel in four parts, is a sprawling digital text whose conspiracy-thriller plot centres on the reconstruction of Iraq. *The Kills* is, I argue, a kind of threnody: a complex work of mourning that counters what Judith Butler calls the "frames of war," which have delimited the Western perspective on Iraq and marked certain deaths as "ungrievable." House's novel not only provides a counter-narrative but teaches a strategy for counter-reading. *The Kills* is a fragmented text that prompts readers to attempt to reassemble its pieces, a strategy that is enacted by its multimodal form, manipulation of genre conventions, and multiple plot threads that lack narrative closure. The trailing threads of this unthreaded threnody are a provocation to continue the work of mourning, not by forgetting but by remaining indignant, inquisitive, and engaged in an ethical reading of the transnational world, a task which demands resilient scepticism and assimilative agility.

Keywords: Richard House, multimodal, hypertext, Iraq, violence, trauma, threnody

She wants to understand how this started, to unthread a sequence and understand the origin, because everything has a start, a place where what is happening is set in motion. . . . Does she need to retreat this far? If this far then why not further, because what she is finding is that there is no single starting point, only multiple threads which appear to bind because of distance, but only ever run parallel?

Richard House, *The Hit* (Book 4, ch. 12, sect. 3)[1]

Richard House's *The Kills* (2013) is a vast multimodal conspiracy thriller whose plot threads trail far across the surface of the globe. These threads tangle together in a number of knots, one of which is a sum of $53 million embezzled by an American contractor in the Iraqi desert under the guise of carrying out reconstruction work. House's focus on peripheral aspects of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is, I argue, designed to counter what Judith Butler calls the "frames of war"—that is, the dominant media narrative that directs and narrows the Western gaze. She contends that these frames also limit our emotional responses to conflict and mark certain deaths as "ungrievable." *The Kills*, I propose, is a threnody, a work that restores mourning as a response to the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath by focussing on this excluded periphery. It is, however, a threnody that attests to its own insufficiency and does not claim to capture the trauma of the conflict in its totality.

House's response reflects the challenge of narrativizing a conflict whose parameters are difficult to define. In his article "In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq" (2012), Roger Luckhurst asks: "When did the war in Iraq start? With the Gulf War in 1991? Earlier? Is it separable from the war in Afghanistan, the longest military engagement in U.S. history? Has the war in Iraq ended?" (714). The recent intervention by United States and United Kingdom military forces against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria suggests that we cannot look forward to answering the last of Luckhurst's questions with any clarity. These latest developments represent yet another chapter in the seemingly endless narrative of the Iraq War. According to Paul Rogers, "[w]e are now at the start of another war—and one that will most likely be measured not in days or months but in years."

This war, which lacks both a stable origin point and a conclusion, is a subject that resists attempts to bring it into sharper focus; it seems to shift before our gaze. "Prior to all efforts at commemoration, explanation or understanding," Ulrich Baer writes, "we must find a place and a position from which we may then gain access to the event" (40). There is an ethical exigency to explain, understand, and, in the case of the West's intervention in Iraq, commemorate a series of events whose representation is marked by distortion, obfuscation, and a willed amnesia.

Nevertheless, our understanding of the subject is so uncertain that such attempts are seemingly thwarted before they can even begin.

House's novel, I argue, responds to these complications not by finding a fixed perspective on its subject but by using its uncertainty as a structuring principle. The novel's fragmentary nature and dangling plot threads acknowledge that a totalising view of Iraq is impossible, particularly when it comes to measuring and feeling the weight of the losses incurred in the Iraq War and its aftermath. Butler addresses this question in relation to Iraqi civilians whose lives are framed by Western media for its readers so that they experience the war's human cost as "ungrievable." She argues that "specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frameworks, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (1). Butler's perception of the effect of these ungrievable deaths on the West's psyche draws on Sigmund Freud's notion of the melancholic, who, unable to grasp what she has lost, is incapable of working through that loss. The frames Butler describes allow the West's sense of responsibility toward Iraq to remain dormant; they consign material that threatens to disturb or provoke us to the fringes of our collective subconscious. House's novel offers a perspective beyond the frames of war yet can only gesture toward the outer peripheries of our vision, awakening our sense of what is hidden rather than recovering it. As such, *The Kills* is a threnody that stirs readers' consciences and opens us up to grief but which, in denying us closure, does not allow us to move beyond a sense of loss.

House is deeply concerned with the pernicious role that stories have played in the West's justification of the war in Iraq. In an interview titled "An Epic Project," he discusses the composition of his novel:

> I wanted to look at how stories can be manipulative, how dangerous it is for someone to tell you their story. I can remember feeling angry at how complicit I was, we all were, about going to war with Iraq. Why wasn't I on the streets screaming about it? Why did I swallow the nonsense we were told? I probably knew at the time that it was fabricated, but I didn't examine it.

The Kills offers a narrative in opposition to the kind that was used to justify the invasion of Iraq; it takes a critical stance on the motivations behind the invasion and calls on readers to assemble the disjointed narrative rather than "swallow" it. *The Kills* resists the idea that narrative requires a stable point of origin or must provide closure, and in the process it grants readers agency. It asks them to piece the story together yet ultimately insists that they accept that the conclusions drawn are conjectural and incomplete. It is less a counter-narrative than an exercise in how to begin counter-reading—specifically, by approaching dominant media narratives with a combination of resilient scepticism and assimilative agility.

Butler writes that "when the frame jettisons certain versions of war, it is busily making a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance" (xiii). *The Kills* responds to the frames of war by considering the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq from angles that restore elements of the narrative that have typically been excluded, and in so doing it becomes a form of resistance. The novel draws on the "rubbish heap" of Iraq in a literal as well as figurative sense: it hinges on a story of contractors who operate a "burn-pit" in Iraq, one of the huge open-air furnaces used to burn everything from human body parts to surplus military supplies. No part of the novel is staged in the theatre of war. Instead, *The Kills* tells a story of the corruption, exploitation, and high-level conspiracy that occurs in the invasion's aftermath. The story of the burn pits provides an analogy for the noxious power that, though excluded by the frames of war, continues to play out in the world around us.

This aftermath is a kind of ongoing trauma and one that the frame, which Butler writes "seeks to institute an interdiction on mourning" (xiv), will not allow us to work through. *The Kills* is saturated in a sense of mourning yet does not claim to grasp all that has been lost or offer catharsis. House's strategy is not, then, to attempt to recover all that has been excluded from the frame and bring it out into the light but rather to hint at losses that are all the more devastating because they never quite emerge from the shadows. The kind of resistance *The Kills* performs is, as I noted above, that of a threnody: a lament which often

takes the form of a musical composition. The novel's power lies in the cumulative effect of the mournful tune that plays out in a number of different narrative threads as transpositions of the same sad story or, as one character puts it, "multiple threads which appear to bind . . . but only ever run parallel" (Book 4, ch. 12, sect. 3). In an interview with Jeff Vandermeer, House states that he "dislike[s] the transformation of life or events into a received three-part act with an intensity." This structure, he suggests, parallels the way that "media shape events." *The Kills* eschews these familiar shapes in favour of cycles, repetition, and parallel lines.

In its focus on the peripheral, *The Kills* launches a sweeping critique of a neoliberal world order in which a deep-seated human drive to do harm seems to flourish. The Iraq sections of the novel are placed alongside sections set in Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Turkey, the US, and the UK to capture a fragmented picture of a global network. Once again, the novel's vision of the world is not totalising; rather, it renders audible some of the reverberative noise of the busy machine of global capitalism, an example of what Sharae Deckard calls "a world-system novel" (364). Deckard uses this term to describe Roberto Bolaño's fragmented novel *2666* (2004), a work to which House is indebted. I will return to the parallels between House and Bolaño, as well as Deckard's "world-system novel," later in this essay.

The Kills is predominantly concerned with characters who are bewildered by the complexity of the world around them and thus arrested in a disempowered state. I argue, however, that House's demanding text offers incentive to the mentally alert and inquisitive reader. In this way, *The Kills* operates as a training ground for negotiating the ethical snares of the globalized world which likewise calls for an indefatigable desire to understand the totality, even when satisfaction of such a goal ultimately proves to be impossible. The novel's disjointed plots draw the reader's attention to the distorted and distantiated way that cause and effect operate in the contemporary age. The central example of this is a fable whose essential components repeat throughout the novel via a variety of characters separated in time and space. The tale involves the exploitation of an unwary person who is driven either by greed or necessity to seek money without asking questions about its source, only to find that

she has been exploited and that she is unable to avoid complicity in the exploitation of others. The fable highlights systemic failures of global capitalism but opens the possibility that we can sidestep this trap if we try to understand the ethical implications of our actions and exercise our agency accordingly.

House seeks to make his readers ethical and autonomous agents of this kind, not only through the fable but through a variety of strategies that insist upon the reader taking an unusually active role. I will explore the features of the novel that demand this kind of engagement from the reader and give fuller consideration to their implications for the ethical thrust of the novel as a whole. I begin with a consideration of an unusual feature of the text: its multimodality. I connect House's use of multiple media with the novel's subversion of the thriller/detective genre and suggest that the reader-detective is encouraged—yet ultimately thwarted—in her attempt to put together the "clues" seemingly promised by extra-textual information. *The Kills* contains multiple plot threads, but I will focus on the fictional story of the burn pit and the documentary source material on which House draws. By emphasizing the theme of trauma and aftermath that runs through this plot thread, I argue that traumatic repetition is significant to the quartet as a whole. This, in turn, represents a parallel to Iraq and its aftermath—a conflict with no clear point of origin or termination, for which we in the West cannot cease to mourn because we do not yet understand the extent of its human cost. *The Kills* is, then, a fitting tribute: a threnody that mourns but does not console.

I. Media and Genre

I call *The Kills* an unthreaded threnody because it is composed of a number of narratives that—though partially woven together—are frayed, trailing into separate threads. It gives the story an unfinished quality that denies its reader a sense of completion and consolation; the text lingers in the mind and refuses to be forgotten. House achieves this effect, in part, through the features of his novel that have attracted the most attention: its size and its multimodal form. I will begin with these features.

The Kills is technically a quartet of four books titled *Sutler*, *The Massive*, *The Kill*, and *The Hit.* Together they make up a narrative on an epic scale: over one thousand pages of print supplemented by over one hundred minutes of film. Nevertheless it is misleading to refer to *The Kills* as a *long* novel, with the suggestion the word carries of a linear plot drawn out over an extended period of time. Instead, it is useful to think of *The Kills* as a musical threnody: multiple storylines represent separate melodies and multiple media the instruments that play together in concert. We do not hear these refrains and instruments played together as we would in a musical piece, yet the sad melody of *The Kills* emerges from a kind of layering in which time and space are collapsed, a richness that is more apparent when we hold the novel as a whole in our minds. The connections between the novel's disparate parts contribute to its emotional depth and cast the reader in the role of reader-detective. She must formulate theories of her own if she is to put the dismembered text back together, a mentally taxing and active approach. *The Kills* is thus a detective novel of sorts, although it resists the neat resolution of the conventional clue-puzzle.

House's use of media is thus significant in terms of its emotional resonance and play with genre conventions, but before these elements can be addressed in greater detail, it is necessary to define the nature of his digital experiments. Digital novels are still relatively rare, and the literary establishment has not always greeted them with unqualified enthusiasm; certainly, *The Kills*' digital content made it an unusual entry on the 2013 Man Booker Prize longlist. Nevertheless, in her review for *The Guardian,* Kate Pullinger—a novelist who uses multimodal forms in her own writing—comments: "This is the first time I've read a digital edition of a primarily text-based novel where I've thought: yes, this works." Variant forms of multimodal fiction and the terminology used to describe such texts are evolving as technology becomes available to support new possibilities. Alice Bell's term "hypertext fiction" might be applied to *The Kills* since it is a digital novel that contains hyperlinks with "accompanying image, film and sound" (Bell 1). *The Kills* is interspersed with fragments of chat room exchanges, photographs, audio clips, and links to short films, which can be accessed via hyperlink in the digital

version and are accessible through the publisher's website for those reading print copies. House's artistic background ranges beyond that of a novelist. His years as part of the artistic collective Ha Ha inform his thinking and he cites artists such as Sophie Calle and Sadie Benning as influences on *The Kills* (House, "Interview"). His storytelling takes a fluid approach to influences and media and reflects a broader trend towards convergence culture, a term coined by Henry Jenkins to describe narrative that flows across a number of different media platforms.

Why, then, do House's digitally augmented features work, and to what effect? The answer lies partly in the way that such technologies promote the notion of a new kind of reader who is more active, even participatory, than is usually allowed to be the case. Jenkins argues that as media technologies proliferate, a new form of storytelling is emerging that represents a "cultural shift, whereby consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections between dispersed media content" (3). Much of the content outside the *The Kills*' main body is not integral to its central plot but rather adds detail to the world of the text. It is what Jenkins labels "additive comprehension" (123), a phrase he borrows from the gaming world. Material that offers additive comprehension is tangential rather than integral to the plot, but the information it offers can shift the reader's perception of events that are central to the narrative.

Since *The Kills* has strong elements of the conspiracy thriller, the promise of additive comprehension is intriguing. It suggests further clues to the main narrative. In two of the short films that accompany the first book (*Eric: Code 1* and *Eric: Code 2*), the reader is given a key to the code that one character employs when writing in his journal. The information this code provides gives readers extra insights into Eric's character and backstory but does not help them solve questions related to the central plot. The short films, which seem to hold the promise of a clue, really perform the opposite function. In a mystery novel, a clue usually helps readers to solve the mystery and, in finding resolution, be released from suspense. In contrast, the short films offer humanising glimpses of characters and often expand on their memories and reflections in a way that takes readers out of the time and place of the main text. The films

typically focus on a single character rather than the plot as a whole, and their lo-fi aesthetic and switch to a more intimate first-person perspective indicates a break with the main narrative. The main body of the text conforms to the conventions of thrillers in which characterisation and interiority are limited and dispassionate; the short films complicate this dominant tone. When the characters explored in the films meet with violence or summarily disappear from the main text, for example, this deeper characterization gives the losses greater emotional resonance.

This sense of loss is often arrested to some degree, however, by the reader's uncertainty over whether a character has irretrievably disappeared or died, or whether the narrative has simply broken off at a moment of mystery or peril. In his interview with Vandermeer, House notes that he "take[s] it for granted that a reader can complete a story arc without it needing to be spelled out. I have a particular dislike of being instructed, of being told how everything works, how I should feel, how I should think." It is clear that House writes for a reader who prefers to be independent or prefers a story arc that is not made overly plain. Elements of the novel that make participation a mandatory part of the reading experience also demand readerly independence. In order to read the digital version of *The Kill*, the reader must choose either "heads" or "tails." Each option has different implications for the sequence of the subsequent narrative. In *The Kill,* instructions precede the narrative. They read:

> This book can be read in two ways.
>
> The content is identical. Only the narration is different.
>
> Choose tails, and you will read the book in chronological order.
>
> Choose heads, and you will encounter a character, read their story and move on to the next. (Book 3, front matter)

The Kill is an example of what Espen J. Aarseth calls an "ergodic text," a term derived from the Greek words for "work" and "path" which describes a text that requires "nontrivial effort" from the reader to determine how to progress through it (1). In *The Kill* this "nontrivial effort" is

the selection of either "heads" or "tails." *The Kill* might also be described using David Ciccoricco's term "network fiction"—that is, a fictional text that "makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and re-combinatory narratives" (4). As House tells us that although "the content is identical," through the reader's intervention "the narration is different." This performs a similar function to additional reasoning which likewise requires "non-trivial effort" from the reader and potentially alters the reader's perspective on the narrative, making her aware that she is playing an active role in the way that the text's meaning is made.

The underlying irony of the text is that although these features promise the reader greater insight into the novel or even a degree of control over its course, they deliver neither. The novel's sophisticated multimodality and proliferation of material only underline our sense of its skimpiness in terms of catharsis or resolution. The novel points, in fact, to its own inability to recover all the information it needs to tell a complete story. In the opening of *The Arc and the Machine*, Caroline Bassett argues that anxieties about the capacity of narrative to capture the weight of the information of its contemporary moment is both a feature of the present and a crisis we have encountered before. Summarizing Walter Benjamin's position in "The Storyteller," Bassett writes that Benjamin, from his position on "the threshold of the age of mass communication," argued that "narrative could not survive the moment of information" (1).[2] Similarly, although "[n]arrative has been understood as something that can encompass vast landscapes and single atoms[,] . . . its place [now] looks less sure in a world where information is pervasive" (Bassett 1).

The Kills reflects Bassett's sense that narrative, as it "has been understood," is under strain to encompass its subject matter in "the age of mass communication." House's bold experiments in digital form suggest optimism, however, for narrative's regenerative power— that is, narrative, but not as it has previously been understood. Instead, he suggests that bewildering times sharpen our appetite for the wrong kind of stories—ones that simplify the truth and effectively close down our more inquisitive impulses. *The Kills* is a response to his sense of remorse that he was once prepared to "swallow" the story that justified the invasion

of Iraq. His novel is full of characters who experience grief because they prove similarly gullible. *The Kills*' innovative use of multi-modal storytelling mimics how we receive news of the world in the information age: in almost unmanageable quantities and through a variety of intersecting media technologies. The reader is required to be active, sceptical, and intellectually engaged with the multimodal text if she wishes to pursue the satisfaction of piecing together the novel's fragments, of restoring a degree of order to the narrative by untangling a chain of cause and effect.

It is also true to say, however, that the reader's drive for narrative resolution is ultimately thwarted. House refuses to offer a reductive perspective on the chaos of its subject matter and subsequently denies the reader a sense of closure. While the novel's clue-puzzle elements drive us to find culprits and motives, we move ever outwards, drawing in a greater number of crimes and victims. In this respect, the novel contains parallels to Bolaño's *2666*, which House cites as a major influence ("An Epic Project"). Laura Barberan Reinares writes that "one of the strongest lures" of Bolaño's novel is that in its "impassive repetition of the horror, the author showcases an extreme example of an economic system that privileges profits over lives" (51). *The Kills* echoes *2666* in its multi-part structure of loosely linked narratives, its repetition of stories of violence and exploitation that strongly resemble one another, and the light it shines on the relationship between violence and the mechanisms of global capitalism.

2666 depicts a series of murders in fictional Santa Teresa, a poor industrial city in Mexico with many textile factories. There, the abused and brutalized corpses of young women who work in the factories are discovered by a largely indifferent police force. The text hints that the murders may be linked to powerful and wealthy figures in the city, but the crimes also come to stand in for an exploitative system that puts its workers' bodies in grotesquely strained and dangerous conditions to increase its profitability. This idea parallels House's engagement with the story of unsafe conditions at Iraqi burn pits as a way of critiquing the privatization of war and the dark consequences of pursuing conflict for economic gain. Each novel denies readers the unmasking of identifiable

villains and suggests that the evil at the root of the outrages documented by the texts is systemic and that a society that values capital over the sanctity of human life is inherently violent.

The Kills differs from the metaphysical detective novel, however, in that it is less interested in the classic figure of the detective—the loner and outsider who ultimately restores narrative order—than a figure we might call "the middleman" whose inaction, inattention, or ignorance does not make her blameless, although restitution ultimately proves beyond her power. Reviewers such as Jake Kerridge and Kate Pullinger, respectively, note that the novel offers an unusual perspective on the conflict in Iraq and that its mourning of the middlemen is perhaps more unusual still.

II. Story and Source Material

The rituals that mark the deaths of military personnel encode the significance of the deaths within a structure of national symbolism; the death of a private contractor, however, is another matter. Contractors who work alongside one another are not necessarily citizens of the same country. They are typically hired by a multinational corporation rather than enlisted to serve their country. This affects how their deaths are symbolically mourned and statistically recorded. This is made clear in a report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), an independent American agency charged by Congress with the task of inspecting all aspects of Iraq's reconstruction carried out with American funds. One report discusses the difficulty of recording the deaths of third-party nationals and those whose nationality was unknown, as well as of guessing the number of deaths overall when "no agency managed a central database for reconstruction or stabilization categories" (3). The paucity of data has helped to obscure the number of contractor deaths in Iraq and divert curiosity about a host of potentially embarrassing issues concerning the role of British and American multinationals in Iraq in the wake of the invasion.

I turn now to the story of the contractors and the source material House recovers from the margins where it was obscured by the frames of war. I argue that bringing attention to this forgotten group is a kind of resist-

ant mourning, and I also suggest that House's contractors are not merely victims but also unwilling collaborators in a larger conspiracy. By further exploring the central trope of the burn pits, I argue that there are ethical principles at play in *The Kills* that are consonant with those emphasized by the text's multimodal form and subversion of the thriller/detective genre. If, as I have argued above, these features construct an active reader, then I suggest that House's story and use of source material underline why this way of reading the world around us is necessary to avoid being exploited or becoming complicit in the exploitation of others.

Insofar as a rhizomatic plot like that of *The Kills* can be described as having a centre, we might posit that House's quartet begins in the burn pits in Iraq's Amrah City. The burn pits are slated for closure in order to ready the site for "a new military base and new city," which is referred to by the project name "The Massive" (Book 1, ch. 1, sect. 3). Though the project exists on paper, it is a fiction—one of many that have been created as fronts for the large-scale embezzlement of government funds. Those who might act as whistle-blowers discover themselves to be too implicated in the scheme to risk its exposure, while others want only to collect their salaries and return home as soon as possible. The project's architects carry out an explosion at the headquarters of the Massive in an attempt to obscure the paper trail and provide a distraction during which Sutler, a man hired to act as a decoy, will make his escape. Those on Sutler's trail miss several clues that he is merely an auxiliary: a "sutler" is an archaic term for "a person who followed an army and sold provisions to the soldiers" ("Sutler, n."). Nevertheless, the distraction created is enough to allow Paul Geezler, the shadowy figure behind the scam, to slip away. Neither he nor the missing money is ever found.

The story of the scam is nested within other narratives, each of which operates as a protective shell for the one inside it. The story of the Massive covers up a fifty-three million dollar scam; in turn, the story of Sutler as the culprit deflects attention from Geezler. It is never revealed whether Geezler is really the man behind the conspiracy or is acting on behalf of someone else. There is a further, extra-textual shell, if we consider how the conspiracy is embedded in the West's justification of the invasion of Iraq. It is not my intention to list, much less evaluate, the

many hidden motivations that have been suggested as having influenced George W. Bush's and Tony Blair's administrations' decisions to invade Iraq. It is sufficient to state that their central claim about the existence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction was founded on false information.

The Kills avoids any discussion of the events that brought the contractors to Iraq. More strikingly, the story does not feature a single Iraqi.[3] In an interview, House notes that he did not travel to Iraq during the writing process and instead drew on his experience as a child of a military family that moved from place to place without any real sense of the country around them: "When I was with my dad on a military base in Malta or Cyprus or Germany, we could have been in England for all the interaction we had with any Germans or Maltese or Cypriots. It was very artificial" ("An Epic Project"). House risks allowing his reader to accept the "artificial" state of affairs that seems natural to the characters in *The Kills* together with his characters' failure to engage with the events that have prompted their presence in Iraq. For an alert reader, however, conspicuous absences demand further attention.

The burn pits are a potent symbol of the mismanagement of the rebuilding of Iraq and an example of the very real consequences of the invasion that have been consigned to the periphery of Western public awareness. They are also a metaphorical representation of ideas with which the text is heavily concerned: negation, disappearance, and the remnants of that which we attempt to negate. The Iraqi burn pits, opened as a temporary measure but maintained indefinitely, have proven controversial for a number of reasons. Firstly, they have been linked to a cover-up of the lax regulation and misappropriation of government funds under the "cost plus" system. In the documentary *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006), Pratap Chatterjee, the executive director of corporate watchdog CorpWatch, explains that the cost plus system "encourages you to run up the cost of a programme because you're going to get a cut of the final cost." With contracts awarded to multinational corporations that have grown so large they have no competition to keep them in check and little infrastructure to oversee spending, the cost plus system effectively represents a blank cheque to

the companies that win government contracts. In the same documentary, James Logsdon, a former truck driver for KBR/Halliburton attests that "[t]hey'd get the wrong equipment, order the wrong stuff, computers still in boxes, new vehicles. . . . They'd just push them in what they call burn pits and then just set it on fire, claiming the loss so they'd get the money for the right equipment or the right stuff they needed." The documentary also alleges that the pits were illegally used to dispose of plastics and fuels that, on burning, release a number of highly toxic pollutants. The burn pits in *The Kills* seem closely modelled on these case studies. The novel focuses on the role played by a fictional multinational named HOSCO. *The Massive* describes the reactions of the contractors as they hear that news of what has been happening at the burn pits has leaked and there is a chance that legal action will be taken against the men who operated them. One man responds: "We didn't know what we were burning. No one knew. It wasn't any one person's idea" (Book 2, Part 5). Once again, willingness to "swallow" a story and failure to take responsibility for one's own role is a fatal mistake. The contractors, convinced that they are too complicit to extricate themselves from the controversy of what happens at the burn pits and implicated by their acceptance of small bribes from their overseer, feel powerless to resist being drawn into the cover-up of the larger scam operated by Geezler (that is, the embezzlement of funds intended for the Massive).

As Chatterjee's account suggests, the Iraqi burn pits have been used to obliterate mistakes and corruption, but there is no fire without smoke. Just as attempts to erase proof of corruption create new conspiracies and deceit, the burn pits produce toxins. The smoke and noxious fumes released by the burn pits are serious issues. There were a number of health complaints from those who operated the pits while they were still open, and it has since been alleged that the toxins released during burning have caused conditions ranging from chronic skin issues to terminal cancer in those who came into contact with the fumes. *The Massive* opens with a bleak chapter titled "Meat," which provides a relentless and affectless catalogue of the deaths of each of the contractors at the site of the Massive:

> Luis Francesco Hernandez was buried without the family in attendance.
>
> Before Luis, by eighteen years, came Clark, who'd had most of his tongue cut out and his voice box removed.
>
> Before Clark came Watts, who at forty-seven was struck by the downtown bus. . . . Watts had his mind on a bottle of bourbon.
>
> Before Watts came Samuels, whose body was not discovered and whose death went unrecorded. (Book 2, Part 1)

The list continues in this reverse chronological order, concertinaing together the wasted lives scattered over a number of years. One by one, the men are dogged by addictions, mental health problems, and disease. Their lives end prematurely, often from cancer. Since the novel's publication, cases resembling those in *The Kills* have come to light amongst contractors and servicemen alike. In March 2013, the death of Sean Terry, a thirty-three-year-old ex-US Marine attracted media attention. Terry died of oesophageal cancer; his widow alleges that his death "was the direct result of his exposure to open-air burn pits in Iraq" (Farberov). In July 2014, Bill Briggs reported that a new federal registry of US troops and veterans possibly sickened by toxic smoke in Iraq and Afghanistan had gathered nearly eleven thousand eligible names.

The burn pits demonstrate that, in physical terms, when we destroy something it does not so much disappear as transform into something else. In narrative terms, the long-reaching consequences of the toxins released by the burn pits suggest that when we attempt to destroy evidence and efface blame, something inevitably escapes our control. Yet there is no poetic justice in the way that this plays out. Just as the smoke from the burn pits works its damage on the exploited workers who operate the pits rather than those who profit from them, the consequences of an action are not necessarily visited upon its perpetrators. In fact, the reverse is usually true in *The Kills*: the characters who do the least harm and whose innocence breeds unwariness are the most likely to be harmed by the "toxins" drifting throughout the text. Toxins that have both a cause and an effect and wreak damage on the human body in random and unpredictable ways over time provide a useful parallel to

the way causality functions in the novel. In the next section, I return to the question of narrative structure and sequence and their bearing on the question of how to grieve for a conflict whose origin and end point seem impossible to define.

III. Structure and the Importance of Digital Literacy

Though the novel's story of the contractors disappears from view, it pervades the other narrative threads in unexpected ways. This is the arrested time of the melancholic, for whom time's passing only complicates, rather than attenuates, a sense of what is lost. House argues that we

> have bad habits when it comes to translating life into any kind of narrative. I think this is almost automatic—and I really want to resist this—the way that fictive structures begin to shape and command history. The sense that events have a beginning, a middle, and an end is pernicious. . . . I find this notion of closure really dangerous and it works against my experience of the world, of history. ("More Stark Than Bleak")

House's resistance to "closure," a resistance that is key to the text's performance as an unthreaded threnody, is also encoded in *The Kills*' relationship to the digital. Digital media are a theme of *The Kills*, part of its texture, and inspire elements of its structure. In this section I consider how networked structures are manifest in *The Kills* as well as how the novel suggests the virtues of becoming digitally literate to resist the "fictive structures" that threaten to falsify our view of the world around us.

The Kills resists the automatic structure House finds so dangerous and, in so doing, offers a different sense of Iraq's history. Indeed, the novel insists that we recognize Iraq's history as an aspect of the ongoing present. Part two of the text, *The Massive*, contains both the earliest and latest points in the story in chronological terms. The "Meat" chapter begins with a photograph of a line of tiny Mexican death heads, an analogue for the list of contractors' deaths that follows. This first chapter contains the furthest glimpse into the future; Hernandez's death occurs some twenty years after the events of the novel, which occur either soon before or after the explosion at the burn pits. *The Massive* also revisits

the events leading up to the explosion, going further back in time and offering new perspectives and revelations. As such, the explosion is not so much a point of origin for the narrative as a dynamic event whose effects propel the narrative on a new course and splinter it into a number of separate stories.

The centripetal force of the initial explosion on the narrative is also geographical. The story moves outward from Iraq with a host of American and British characters and continues in Turkey, Italy, Malta, and Cyprus; characters from Germany, Norway, France, Japan, and China are also introduced. Correspondence between these times, places, and narrative threads is unpredictable. It manifests as unexpected echoes, sometimes between characters who do not meet. This aspect of the text is part of a larger strategy of disorientation I noted above, in which House denies the reader a firm grasp of the events described in order to encourage her to become a reader-detective and emphasize the complexity of the events on which the text comments. The inclusion of these scattered locations allows us to transpose the story of the Massive in Iraq to a more global context and read this localized story of exploitation as a broader critique of neoliberalism.

Deckard's term "world-system novel," conceived with *2666* in mind, captures House's strategy. Deckard argues that *2666* "does not strive to take the whole world into itself, synecdochically enfolding whole fields of knowledge" and that its success in "mapping the incommensurable geographies of global capital" is rather achieved by modelling the fragmented condition of the world by creating a "novel in parts": "its structure, moving between classes, geographies, and genres, recreates the fractured social relations of reality in the semi-periphery" (364). *The Kills*, like *2666*, uses fragmented stories to hint at a larger whole. It "mov[es] between classes, geographies, and genres," but its digital dimension introduces additional possibilities. As a hypertext fiction, the Internet is in the novel's DNA; the structure and our means of navigating the novel speak of a world which is densely interconnected in ways that are often chaotic or dissonant. This in turn is echoed in the novel's plot, which mimics how we read hypertext: more laterally than linearly, from link to link rather than top to bottom.

This is not to say that House demonizes the Internet as another agent of chaos in the unequal globalized world, or even as merely a mirror of it. I suggested above that House uses digital forms to encourage us to become reader-detectives; the story points out how the Internet can imbue the individual with greater access to information and function as a platform for expression. *The Kills* is not only a hypertext fiction but also a novel that foregrounds the role that digital media plays in informing and allowing us to shape our own narrative of our place in events beyond the personal sphere. Daniel Bennett offers the example of Salam Pax, the pseudonym for high-profile Iraqi blogger Salam Abdulmunem, to highlight the impact of new media on war reporting: "Blogs offered a straightforward publishing outlet for people who wanted to express their views on events which fundamentally affected their lives. In turn, journalists began to realise the potential of blogs and other digital media to complement their coverage of war and terror" (1). Bennett's example suggests that digital media have the potential to connect people who are otherwise distanced both from each other and centres of power and who mediate the relative powerlessness of their position in relation to the media and those in power.

The Kills stresses this most strikingly in the narrative thread that follows Cathy Gunnerson, the wife of a burn pit operative and perhaps the closest thing *The Kills* has to a hero. Suspicious of HOSCO's legitimacy and the burn pits from the outset, she becomes increasingly lonely. She checks her inbox regularly and, finding it empty of messages from her husband Rem, begins to email partners and family of Rem's co-workers, eventually establishing a message board and chatroom.[4] Blocks of text from these exchanges are embedded in the novel, including Cathy's initial fumblings as she struggles to adapt to the new medium. The forums quickly become a place to air grievances against HOSCO. Initially, contributors gripe about wages and deprivations in the men's daily lives; they later communicate their concerns about the increasingly severe health problems the men experience. Cathy turns into a detective, using her chatrooms to acquire more information and using search engines to uncover more evidence about the mysterious Geezler and the burn pits. Her Boolean search strings are also incorporated into the text: "'burn

pit' + lawsuit + exposure + Iraq, + legislation, + 'sleep apnea' + sores + asthma + respiratory problems" (Book 2, Part 4). Her investigatory work causes some upset in the chatroom community and does not protect her husband against the cancer we know claims his life, but it allows her greater clarity than most of the other characters.

Cathy's increasing digital literacy reflects an outward-facing curiosity and a willingness to notice important, even sinister, points of connection that is contrasted with Rem's passivity and introspection, which leave him unable to learn from his own mistakes. She explains to Rem, essentially a principled man, where she feels he went wrong:

> You let people take advantage of you. It isn't that you're stupid, it's just that you don't see it. They were all running circles round you right from the beginning. The simple fact is you just continued to make the same mistake for the same reasons. You took a job without properly knowing what it involved, you stumbled into it and couldn't see your way out, so rather than drop what you'd gotten yourself into, you just continued. (Book 2, Part 5)

The middlemen of *The Kills* can be read as a corollary of the reader, who is urged to always attempt to "see" and not to "stumble" once she has realised her mistakes. This message, borne out in the plot, is aligned with House's experimentation with form and genre.

Nevertheless, House is also fascinated with what happens when we amplify the virtues that I argue are central to the text. Amplified to a certain pitch, scepticism towards authority figures and a talent for pattern recognition become the conspiracy theorist's mania. In his review of the novel, Jonathan Gibbs writes:

> *The Kills* is a page-turner, but the pages turn back as much as forwards, as you chase up echoes and repetitions—long-forgotten names and places, but also wasps, the smell of jasmine, the gesture of pulling a handbag strap over a shoulder—that might be clues, might be red herrings, might be the product of my own fevered mind.

The Kills is a fable about the dangers of failing to ask questions or draw connections, but it is also a novel that toys with our desire to find meaning where there is sometimes none. This is, I argue, a pertinent message for the Internet age in which our inability to make sense of the torrents of information available to us goes hand-in-hand with our susceptibility to dominant narratives that serve the interests of the powerful.

I return, then, to the notion of *The Kills* as a threnody that does not seek a totalising vision of its subject so as to console us and help us forget but rather rouses us to indignation and encourages a kind of resistance. Speaking of the "media narrative" of Iraq, House complains that "[t]here's an artificiality to all of these stories, because they are always complete, and lessons are always learned. There's always a point" ("More Stark than Bleak"). As such, "there's a sense of putting something away, of learning from it, and of trying to establish one dominant way of regard" ("More Stark than Bleak"). A conventional threnody may insist on a point to loss and lessons learned and usher in the "sense of putting something away." In my concluding section, I consider the role played by pointless deaths, unexplained disappearances, and absence in House's work of resistant mourning.

IV. Conclusion

The healing of a traumatic experience is connected with the

> transformation of the fragmentary and incomprehensible "mnemic residues" of the traumatic experience into a coherent narrative [which] involves two main tasks: the filling of memory gaps that render the compulsive repetitions of the event incomprehensible, and the establishment of a temporal distance between the subject's present and the past of the traumatic event. (Modlinger and Sonntag 42)

The Kills is full of "compulsive repetitions" that provide readers with a discomfiting sense of *déjà vu* that suggests that the violence and exploitation they encounter throughout the story moves in cycles rather than towards resolution.

The novel is marked by "memory gaps" that refuse to be filled. In *The Kills*, absence is a dynamic presence that, like a black hole, is not visible but exacts a warping influence on other aspects of the narrative. In order to make sense of the novel, readers must resist simple stories and work to assimilate those that are fragmented and full of holes. Like a journalist scanning a partially redacted document, the reader must attend to what is on the page as well as what is conspicuously absent. In the novel's first part, *Sutler*, this principle is suggested in an exchange between Geezler, the architect of the Massive, and Paul Howell, a man who is about to become his accomplice. Geezler relates the findings of a "test" in which subjects "are taken to a basketball game and asked to count the passes" and given an incentive to "sweeten the activity and make it competitive" (Book 1, ch. 1, sect. 2). A man in a gorilla suit walks onto the court halfway through the game but "nobody in fact gives the gorilla any attention" and fewer still raise the subject later because "if they focus on one task, they won't see what matters. They won't see things right" (Book 1, ch. 1, sect. 2). This is almost a direct challenge to readers to attempt to "see things right," not by focusing on what noisily claims their attention but by observing what is on the periphery of their vision.

While *The Kills* pointedly shies away from directly depicting the deaths and disappearances of Iraqis, it repeatedly invokes the trope of missing people. The story is full of missing people, including Sutler, who is last shown striding out into a snowy field; Eric, an American student who succumbs to a seizure while climbing; Suzuki, a Japanese woman fleeing her husband; and Reike, who ends the novel shut in a darkened, soundproof room with no hope of rescue. In *The Kill*, a silent vigil is held by people who have "lost members of their family and who have no idea where they are" (Book 3, Year 3: Missing, Friday). The carcinogenic burn pits, in which body parts are disposed of, hint at many more lost people, those "ungrievable" deaths beyond the reaches of mourning. The novel does not suggest how we might sufficiently recover the memories of the Iraqi civilians killed in conflict to begin to mourn and forget them. The trope of unrecovered bodies symbolizes the memory gaps that cannot be filled to allow a working through of Iraq. House is determined to deny readers the ability to close the narrative on Iraq and

thus leave it behind; instead, he insists that we play out the memory repeatedly rather than let it fade.

The Kills refuses to let us either move beyond loss or be paralyzed with grief: the novel's aspects are aligned in an overarching strategy to create a reader who can exercise her own judgement. Early in *The Kills*, a documentary maker named Nathalie reflects:

> [W]hen I was a child I was very forgetful, and my parents adored me, they spoiled me and replaced everything I lost with something new or better so I could become even more careless. I never had anything old. I had the idea that one person was collecting my things. Not stealing them but keeping them for me somewhere. This was my excuse. Just imagine all the things you've lost, everything you've mislaid, collected in one room, like at a train station. Safe, all in one place. (Book 1, ch. 3, sect. 1)

House denies his readers this kind of "spoiling": what is lost remains lost. By refusing to collect what is lost "in one room,"—that is, by refusing to create a totalising narrative—he demands that we look on the world with a clear gaze and respond to it accordingly.

Notes

1 In the absence of a consistent form of pagination in the Kindle edition I used, citations from *The Kills* refer the reader to a book within the quartet followed by a section within that book. It should be noted that, whereas the chapters of Books 1, 2, and 4 are numbered, chapters in Book 3 (whose sequence can be re-arranged) employ a different system.

2 This is Bassett's reading of Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller." Published in 1936, the essay remarks on the increase in volume of information available to readers and the rapidity with which it is distributed. It argues that such plenitude has adversely impacted the individual's capacity for reflection and, by extension, the art of the storyteller.

3 There is one possible exception: Hassan Amer, a British translator working in Iraq, may be meant to be understood as of Iraqi descent. Amer is killed in a road accident early in the narrative. The text notes that, because of the nature of his contract in Iraq, his employers will be able to avoid giving any compensation money to his family, who do not have the financial resources to take the company to court.

4 Kathy's frustration over failing to receive any communication from her husband is reminiscent of Percy's short story "Refresh Refresh."

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